

## Debating the DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints  
in Primary Source Documents

# The Gilded Age

*Age of the Robber Baron or  
Birth of an Industrial Commonwealth?*



This guide contains two short essays offering very different views on the "Gilded Age." On pages 2–3 you will find instructions for taking notes on these essays and planning to debate them as a class. Your first task is to decide which essay you agree with and why. Your second task is to understand and be ready to defend the other essay as well. This will help you get ready to debate the essays in class. This guide will also offer some guidelines for the classroom debate.

# Suggestions for the Student

## ★ *Your Overall Objective*

The essays in this guide present two conflicting views of the late 1800s in America, a time often called the "Gilded Age." Your task is to read the essays, take notes on them, and prepare to debate them in class. All this will help you see something important about studying history. History as a field is an ongoing discussion, or dialogue. Facts and the truth are important. Many matters can be settled. Yet one of the most exciting parts of history is found in the debates that keep it going. These debates are what guide historians in trying to answer the most important questions about the past.

### 1. Review any *Debating the Documents* notes you have.

The two essays in this guide will each mention some of the primary sources in the nine *Debating the Documents* sets on the Gilded Age. To judge each essay, it will help to refresh your memory about the topics and sources used in those sets.

### 2. Read both essays in this guide.

Each essay argues in favor of one view of the Gilded Age. The two essays are very clearly opposed to each other. Each one states its view right away in its first paragraphs. It then supports this view by referring to specific aspects of American life during the late 1800s. The essays are strongly biased, but they back up their claims with facts and sources. You do NOT have to agree with either essay. Your own opinion may differ from both of them. Your goal should be to read the essays carefully and use them to clarify your own ideas about this period of history.



### 3. Take notes on each essay using the Checklist on page 3 of this guide.

This checklist will help you think through all parts of each essay, and it will help you prepare for your role in a class debate about the essays.

### 4. Follow your teacher's instructions for holding a class debate on these essays.

You will have a set task or role to play. It will be to defend one of the essays, ask questions of the defenders, or try to settle differences between the two groups of defenders. You will get a chance to state your own views. However, the debate will work best if you also play the role you are assigned.

### 5. Follow these additional rules for taking part in the debate:

- Use your notes and other worksheets to help you take part in the debate.
- Try to reach agreement about the main ideas and the overall meaning of each essay.
- Look for points of agreement as well as disagreement between the two essays.
- Listen closely in the debate to all points of view about each essay.
- Focus on the strengths of each essay, not merely on whether you agree or disagree with it.

# Essay Analysis Checklist

**Use this checklist to take notes on the two essays in this guide.**

As you read each essay, take a few notes on the topics listed below. Use these when preparing for your role in the debate on these two opposing views about the Gilded Age. (Use other sheets of paper as needed.)

- **State the essay's thesis. That is, state its main idea as presented in the first few paragraphs.**
- **What key statements of fact best help back up the essay's thesis or main idea?**
- **Do any statements of fact seem false or unlikely to be accurate? List them.**
- **Which statements are most biased? That is, which are one-sided opinions not based on facts or clear reasons? List some.**
- **How well are the primary sources used? Which sources are used to most clearly back up the thesis?**
- **Is the logic of the argument clear? Why or why not?**
- **Overall, how strong a case does this essay make? Why?**

## ★ *The Gilded Age: Age of the Robber Baron* ★

The Civil War was America's most costly war. Hundreds of thousands died. Families were left without breadwinners. Many parts of the South were turned into rubble. Amid the ruins, survivors begged and stole food, or they turned for help to the armies that had just conquered them.

Yet the Union was restored — and it put an end to the nation's great sin, slavery.

Suddenly a time for hope, a window of opportunity, seemed to open. Could the nation "bind up its wounds," uproot past prejudices, help the former slaves adjust to freedom, and make its growing industrial might a source of comfort for all its citizens? In Lincoln's historic phrase, would this be the time for "a new birth of freedom"?

Sadly, the answer to this question has to be a simple "no." The United States threw away a great chance. It might well have created a society true to the democratic principles of its Constitution. It did not. It failed to do so, first of all, because of the continuing strength of racial prejudice. Secondly, it failed because of a ruthlessly competitive economy, one that created vast differences between rich and poor in a harsh, new, urban industrial order.

In the spring of 1865, Sherman's conquest of Atlanta and his sweep through Georgia and the Carolinas completed the defeat of the South. Then on April 14, 1865, President Lincoln was assassinated. Perhaps the great Lincoln could have led the South to accept the

end of slavery and the arrival of black equality. His successor had neither the skill nor the temperament to achieve this.

That successor was Andrew Johnson, a Southerner who was both weak and all too prone to outbursts of anger. Lawmakers in Congress most committed to black equality never trusted him. Those "Radical Republicans," as they are known, soon began to ride roughshod over Johnson and impose harsh military rule on the South. They were absolutely right to do so. The South was, after all, refusing to grant African Americans real equality. By 1866, the Ku Klux Klan was already terrorizing the former slaves. So-called "Black Codes" were already being passed to limit their freedom in many ways.

The effort to impeach Johnson in 1868 shows how bitter the battle over Reconstruction had become by then. The charges had to do with a questionable law Congress had passed to check Johnson's power. In the end, however, the impeachment was not necessary. The Radicals had the votes to override Johnson, and they soon began to do so as they implemented their program for the South.

The Republicans pushed through several laws and new constitutional amendments to enforce black equality. Many idealistic Northerners also went South to work for the Freedmen's Bureau and help blacks in other ways. However, the Republicans were not motivated solely by concern for the former slaves. They also hoped to use black voters

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to ensure Republican political control, both in the South and in Congress as a whole. Blacks took part in what were largely Republican-controlled Southern state governments backed by military rule. At times, these governments were wasteful and corrupt. All this only added to Southern white racist contempt for black voters and legislators.

Meanwhile, Northerners also soon tired of both the idealism and the corruption of Reconstruction. The North pulled the last troops out of the South in 1877. After that Southern white "Redeemer," governments took power and put an end to black political participation. The former slaves were already having to accept tenant and sharecropping arrangements that kept them poor, in debt, and dependent. By the 1890s, all the "Jim Crow" segregation laws were in place. Reconstruction had failed, and the public in the North lost all interest in it.

The public's mood soured in part because racist attitudes, even in the North, remained strong. Also, political corruption and scandal fostered a cynicism at odds with the ideals of the antislavery radicals in Congress. Political corruption was by no means limited to the Reconstruction governments in the South. The scandals of the Grant administration itself killed off the reform spirit of the early Reconstruction era. Such idealism would not reappear for many years.

After 1873, the nation's economy slowed, and labor's place in the social order began to replace slavery as the burning issue of the day. In 1877, after four years of hard times and

high unemployment, a huge railroad strike led to rioting, violence, and loss of life as workers battled police and state militias up and down the railroad lines in West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and elsewhere.

Throughout the nation, the age of big business had arrived. A new generation of hardboiled tycoons gave birth to what Mark Twain called the "Gilded Age," a term summing up a time when money seemed to be all that mattered.

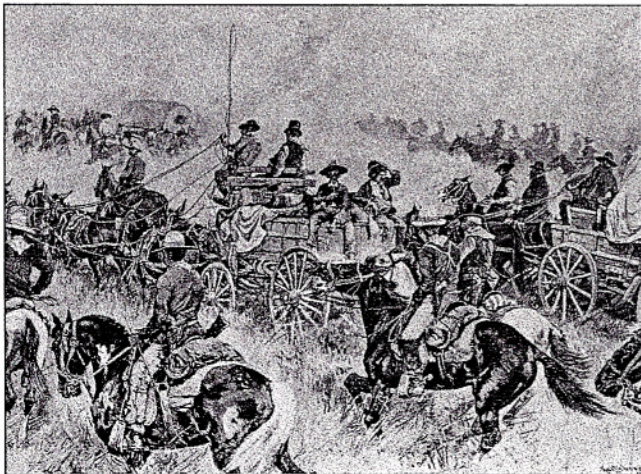


An 1896 cartoon showing Collis Huntington, president of the powerful Southern Pacific Railroad, as a huge octopus. Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California

At the center of that new age of big business were the railroads. The transcontinental lines especially led the way in forming the nation's first truly giant corporations. Often employing tens of thousands of workers, they pioneered in creating the huge bureaucratic, impersonal workplaces of the corporate age. They also led the way in fostering political corruption, bribing legislators with shares of stock and planning elaborate schemes to defraud the public, such as the one that led to the famous Credit Mobilier scandal of 1872.

The transcontinental lines recieved millions of acres of public land and millions of dollars

of public loans to help finance their lines. To sell off those lands, they aggressively promoted rapid settlement of the West. This may have helped some immigrants seeking homesteads on the prairies. However, it also led to a number of tragic results. For one thing, it made wars of extermination against the Indians of the Trans-Mississippi West all but inevitable. From the slaughter at Sand Creek (1864) to Custer's Last Stand (1876) to the final massacre of the Indian Wars at Wounded Knee (1890), the West was tamed with guns and treachery. Agreements and treaties were all revised or ignored as a relentless tide of settlers kept rolling across the land.



A 1905 drawing of settlers rusing to stake out claims in Oklahoma Territory on April 22, 1889. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-110999

Nor did this conquest really benefit the mythic heroes of the West—the “49ers” panning for gold, the cowboys and miners, or the homesteading farmers and ranchers. All these soon found themselves at the mercy of large mine owners, banks, railroads, grain elevator operators, and others. Many of these powerful business interests were ready to swindle them or force them to pay steep prices and

high interest rates at a time when the prices of farm goods were falling.

As a result, agrarian discontent spread like wildfire almost as soon as the railroads had deposited the soon-to-be-disappointed settlers along the rail lines. Millions of these settlers added their produce to that of foreign farmers in a glutted international market. As farm prices dropped, a spirit of revolt arose on the prairies. Through the Grange, the Farmers Alliances and, finally, the Populists, the isolated and helpless farmer vented his rage at a system rigged against him by distant financiers and monopoly corporations.

Moreover, this fear of “monopoly” was by no means limited to farmers in the late 1800s.

It is true that these decades were a time of breath-taking technological progress, in oil, steel manufacturing, electricity, rails, machine tools, farm equipment, and more—as well as in methods of large-scale factory organization. America took its place as a great industrial power. Overall, the nation's wealth soared. Unfortunately, this wealth was largely in the hands of a tiny elite of the super rich. John D. Rockefeller was only the most famous of the “robber barons” who gained monopoly control of their industries through pools, trusts, mergers, and other devices.

Along with Rockefeller and Standard Oil, there was the Sugar Trust, the Tobacco Trust, Andrew Carnegie, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jay Gould, the Chicago meat-packers, and financier J. P. Morgan, who was rich enough to bail out the federal government itself when it was facing bankruptcy in the depression years

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of the 1890s. These titans dominated the economy, building lavish mansions, showing off their wealth, and making life difficult for competitors and smaller businesses.



In this 1890 illustration, immigrants carry their belongings through the Italian Quarter in New York City. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-111151

Urban grandeur and misery co-existed. Along with the skyscrapers, museums, hospitals and amusement parks like Coney Island, there were slums full of wretched tenements, sweatshops, and flop houses. Along with native-born workers, millions of immigrants huddled in these chaotic, filthy, crime-infested urban neighborhoods. The newcomers were from Asia and Southern and Eastern Europe (instead of from the more Anglo-Saxon lands of Western Europe). As a result, anti-immigrant hostility toward them was widespread, and it made their adjustment to American life far more difficult than it otherwise would have been.

Government served the rich and powerful, and therefore it constantly acted to thwart workers in their efforts to organize unions and improve their conditions. Labor violence

became common as police, Pinkerton agents, state militia, and federal troops were all used to end strikes and break up unions. The Haymarket Square riot of 1886 was only one violent clash, though perhaps the most dramatic. The anger and fear that incident provoked actually set back labor organizing efforts badly. During the 1894 Pullman strike, one worker told a reporter that "the only difference between slavery at Pullman and what it was down South before the war is that there the owners took care of their slaves when they were sick and here they don't."

A severe depression began in 1893, showing just how deeply flawed America's industrial system was. These hard times did briefly lead one party, the Democrats, to embrace William Jennings Bryan's call for reform. However, Bryan's failed campaign was soon followed by the Spanish American War of 1898. This war triggered an outpouring of nationalistic zeal for empire. As the U.S. joined the scramble for overseas colonies, the imperialist spirit inspired a new, more arrogant form of racism. The harsh, arrogant mood killed off the spirit of reform and the concern for the downtrodden that had moved Bryan's campaign.

In conclusion, the Gilded Age may well have been an age of technical wonders—in steel, electricity, oil, rails, streetcars, telephones, etc. But for the vast majority of Americans, it was an age of terrible social inequality, a harsh time when the dreams of an earlier, more democratic era were abandoned and forgotten.